



Eschatological Spending Habits

America's abundance was created not by public sacrifices to the common good, but by the productive genius of free men who pursued their own personal interests and the making of their own private fortunes.

Ayn Rand in

Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal (1966)

The disciples said, "Send the crowd away... we have no more than five loaves and two fishes!"... Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, Jesus gave thanks and broke them. Then he gave them to the disciples to set before the people. They all ate and were satisfied.

Luke 9:16-17

As parents of four young children, we get to observe on a regular basis the human proclivity for self-serving, immediate gratification. Left to their raw instincts, our little ones ask, "How do I get mine and get it now?" Whether it's commandeering the computer, consuming the last slice of pie, or appropriating their "video game privileges" before doing their homework, the wheels of ingenuity churn with ruthless efficiency in an attempt to hoodwink or otherwise manipulate Mommy and Daddy into giving them what they want. I don't like to consider how often they succeed.

If our biblical theology is correct, however, such behavior should be of no surprise to the Christian who believes that, because of the Fall, our sinful condition commenced at birth. Children inherently begin as morally deficient creatures who, while initially dependent on their parents, have yet to discover their ultimate dependence on a Creator. Apart

from this discovery, they are left to fend for themselves in a ruthlessly competitive world of finite resources. In other words, in a godless world he who hesitates is lost.

Thus, I've been intrigued recently by the teachings of the late Ayn Rand, the 20th-century champion of the free market and vehement polemicist against the welfare state. Her unabashed defense of the pursuit of self-interest as the highest human virtue produced best-selling books and captured the attention of the business elites (e.g. Alan Greenspan) of rising postwar global capitalism. Her bold views, however, drew scathing criticism and compelled many to temper their association with her school of thought, which, for them, uncomfortably bordered on the veneration of greed.

It is difficult to know what Rand would think about high-level managers

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being awarded an aggregate \$18.4 billion in bonuses (at taxpayers' expense) in the throes of a recession, but one can assume that she would applaud the "productive genius" of those who can amass wealth in the midst of economic chaos. Like eschatologically misguided evangelicals who justify consuming the world's resources without restraint because "it's all going to burn up in the end anyway," the well-resourced exercise their liberty and prowess to get theirs and get it now. Such supply-side habits go far to explain the post-9/11 rush to seize Persian oil fields; privatize the military; and disguise, bundle, and peddle doomed mortgages to an unsuspecting, international bond market. The house is crumbling. Pity the unfortunate. Take the money and run.

I didn't have to study Ayn Rand, however, to develop opportunistic impuls-

es that reinforce the delusion that I am self-made and self-determined. Although I am in "Christian ministry," I've been confronted recently by my loving wife and pastors who have helped to surface my unhealthy insistence on being the master of my own economy. I want to be in control of my "investment portfolio" and parlay my gifts and resources in ways that end up serving my own ends over that of the congregation...or of my family.

The feeding of the 5,000, therefore, serves as a humbling corrective. The disciples have strong opinions about what they think is the best course of action for the hungry masses, especially given their limited resources. Their vision is small, confined by the need to serve out of their own strength. It is when they yield themselves—and their meager resources—in obedience to Christ that they are able to taste, and enter into, a kingdom that shatters the confines of a fallen world. When Jesus stands at the center of ministry, the triumphal hope of the eschaton is made visible now.

As the Obama administration attempts to further deficit-spend (albeit at both ends of the ladder) our way out of economic malaise, it behooves American congregations to embody and proclaim an entirely different reality—a Christ-fed community where no one is in want. This being our vision, the small things suddenly matter: the cooking of meals, the sharing of belongings, tending to the sick, and availing one's gifts—and frailties—to the whole. Spending ourselves in Christ, in each other, and in his world, we can demonstrate to beggar and banker alike that another world is possible. ■

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